DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 068 CS 214 925

AUTHOR Sperling, Melanie
TITLE Revealing the Teacher-as-Reader: A Framework for Discussion and Learning. Occasional Paper No. 40.
INSTITUTION National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Berkeley, CA.; National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Pittsburgh, PA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 95
CONTRACT R117G10036
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Educational Research; Grade 11; High Schools; *Reader Response; *Student Evaluation; *Teacher Response; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetic Reading

ABSTRACT

A study examined an eleventh grade literature teacher's written responses to her students' writing. Copies of the students' graded papers were collected, and the instructor and eight students were interviewed. These sources became central to building a framework detailing five key ways that this teacher oriented herself to student writing: (1) interpretive; (2) social; (3) cognitive/emotive; (4) evaluative; and (5) pedagogical. In the interpretative orientation, the instructor was relating the student texts to her own personal experience and to her knowledge of the student and his or her work. In the evaluative orientation, the instructor invoked disparate roles she has with the students, i.e., "peer," "literary scholar," "teacher," and "aesthetic reader." In the cognitive/emotive orientation, the teacher reflected on her analytical reasoning and her feelings as well. In her evaluative orientation, she assessed whether the student's writing was working for her. And in the pedagogical orientation, she viewed the student writing as vehicles for her own teaching and learning. (Contains one figure showing the five ways of orientation for the teacher-as-reader. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 384 068

National Center for the Study of Writing

Occasional Paper No. 40

Revealing the Teacher-as-Reader: A Framework for Discussion and Learning

Melanie Sperling

March, 1995

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

University of California at Berkeley

Carnegie Mellon University

CS214925

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Occasional Paper No. 40

Revealing the Teacher-as-Reader: A Framework for Discussion and Learning

Melanie Sperling

March, 1995

NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

University of California
Berkeley CA 94720
(510) 643-7022

Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh PA 15213
(412) 268-6444

The publication of this report was supported under the Educational Research and Development Center Program (R117G10036 for the National Center for the Study of Writing) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

This publication was produced on an Apple Macintosh IIsi computer with portrait display monitor and an Apple LaserWriter IIntx printer donated to the National Center for the Study of Writing by Apple Computer, Inc.

EDITOR
Andrew Bouman, *University of California at Berkeley*

PUBLICATION REVIEW BOARD
Peggy Trump Loofbourrow, *University of California at Berkeley, Chair*
Jill Hatch, *Carnegie Mellon University, Assistant Chair*
James E. Lobdell, *University of California at Berkeley, Assistant Chair*
Charles Fillmore, *University of California at Berkeley, Advisor*
Jill H. Larkin, *Carnegie Mellon University, Advisor*

Millie Almy, *University of California at Berkeley*
Nancie Atwell, *Boothbay Region Elementary School, Boothbay Harbor, Maine*
Carol Berkenkotter, *Michigan Technological University*
Lois Bird, *Palo Alto, California*
Sheridan Blau, *University of California, Santa Barbara*
Michael Cole, *University of California, San Diego*
Colette Daiute, *Harvard University*
Richard P. Duran, *University of California, Santa Barbara*
JoAnne T. Eresh, *Writing and Speaking Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*
Andrea Fishman, *West Chester University*
Celia Genishi, *Ohio State University*
Donald Graves, *University of New Hampshire*
Robert Gundlach, *Northwestern University*
Anne J. Herrington, *University of Massachusetts*
George Hillocks, *University of Chicago*
Michael Holzman, *Irvington, New York*
Sarah Hudelson, *Arizona State University*
Julie Jensen, *University of Texas, Austin*
Janice Lauer, *Purdue University*
Andrea Lunsford, *Ohio State University*
Susan Lytle, *University of Pennsylvania*
Martin Nystrand, *University of Wisconsin*
Lee Odell, *Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*
Sondra Perl, *Herbert H. Lehman College of the City University of New York*
Gordon Pradl, *New York University*
Gladys M. Pritchett, *Kent State University*
Victoria Purcell-Gates, *Harvard University*
William Smith, *University of Pittsburgh*
Jana Staton, *Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.*
Deborah Tannen, *Georgetown University*
Betty Jane Wagner, *National College of Education*
Samuel D. Watson, *University of North Carolina*
Gordon Wells, *Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*

Revealing the Teacher-as-Reader: A Framework for Discussion and Learning

Melanie Sperling
Stanford University

Our students, as writers, produce texts for us to read, and we, as readers, respond to what they write. Simple enough. Less simple is knowing how and why we read and respond to students' texts as we do, and less simple still is knowing how to elucidate this readerly process for students.

A ninth-grader, telling me what it was like to have her teacher read and respond to her writing, points up some of the problem. At different moments during our one-hour conversation, she made the following observations about her teacher reader: "He's interested in what you have to say"; "you always get the writing back with a grade"; "he tells you what he doesn't want you to do any more in your writing"; "it's like, if there's a verb tense problem—he writes that [in his comments]." Through her remarks, this perceptive student revealed the broad range of her teacher's reactions—from his engaged stance to his propensity to dispense advice—conveyed in his responses to her written work. She didn't say whether commenting on verb tense also indicated his collegial interest, whether giving a grade also indicated his wants for the writing. Yet, surely these were all tied together—and the student's observations reflected the perception of many English teachers with whom I have worked that responses to students' papers carry many messages simultaneously.

Yet, knowing *that* response carries many messages is assuredly not enough for either teachers or students engaged in the teaching and learning of writing if students are to have a key to the often puzzling teacher reader whom, through their writing, they must somehow reach. Knowing how and why response is a complex communicative act, however, gives students insights on the ways in which reading, and teachers' reading of student writing, is

geared to different writing situations—both to the writers themselves and the types of pieces they are producing. The need for such knowledge is supported by sociocognitive theories of language and learning that relate social context to the mental processes associated with reading and writing (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978).

Responding to the need to better understand the perspective of the teacher-as-reader in order to convey that perspective to student writers, I studied an eleventh-grade English class for some answers about what comprises this perspective and how it gets communicated to students in secondary school English classrooms. Because researchers and teachers alike have lacked a framework for thinking about the perspective of the teacher-as-reader, I hoped, too, to develop such a framework from my observations. If learning to write means, even in part, learning to anticipate readers, then a tool such as a framework for articulating the perspective of the teacher reader should be a helpful addition to writing instruction for both teachers and students.

I observed Ms. Vance's American Literature classroom every day for a semester. During that time students wrote five major papers, based on personal experience as well as on the literature they read and discussed. They wrote personal journals, autobiographies, mock diaries or letters written in the guise of a literary character, literary criticism, and a mixed genre of literary criticism and personal experience. They received written response to this work from Ms. Vance, and they talked about their work in whole-class and one-to-one discussions. I collected copies of the students' writing with the teacher's written comments, recorded all classroom activity, took notes on what I saw, and interviewed Ms. Vance and eight of her students. These sources of information became central to building a framework for thinking about the perspective teachers bring to reading students' writing. (For a detailed account of this research, including design, methods and full analysis, see Sperling, 1994.)

Through analyzing these data, I articulated five key ways that this teacher reader oriented herself to her student writers and their writing. Her orientations were: (a) *interpretive*, (b) *social*, (c) *cognitive/emotive*, (d) *evaluative*, and (e) *pedagogical*. These five orientations came to comprise the framework for thinking about the teacher-as-reader's perspective (see Figure 1).

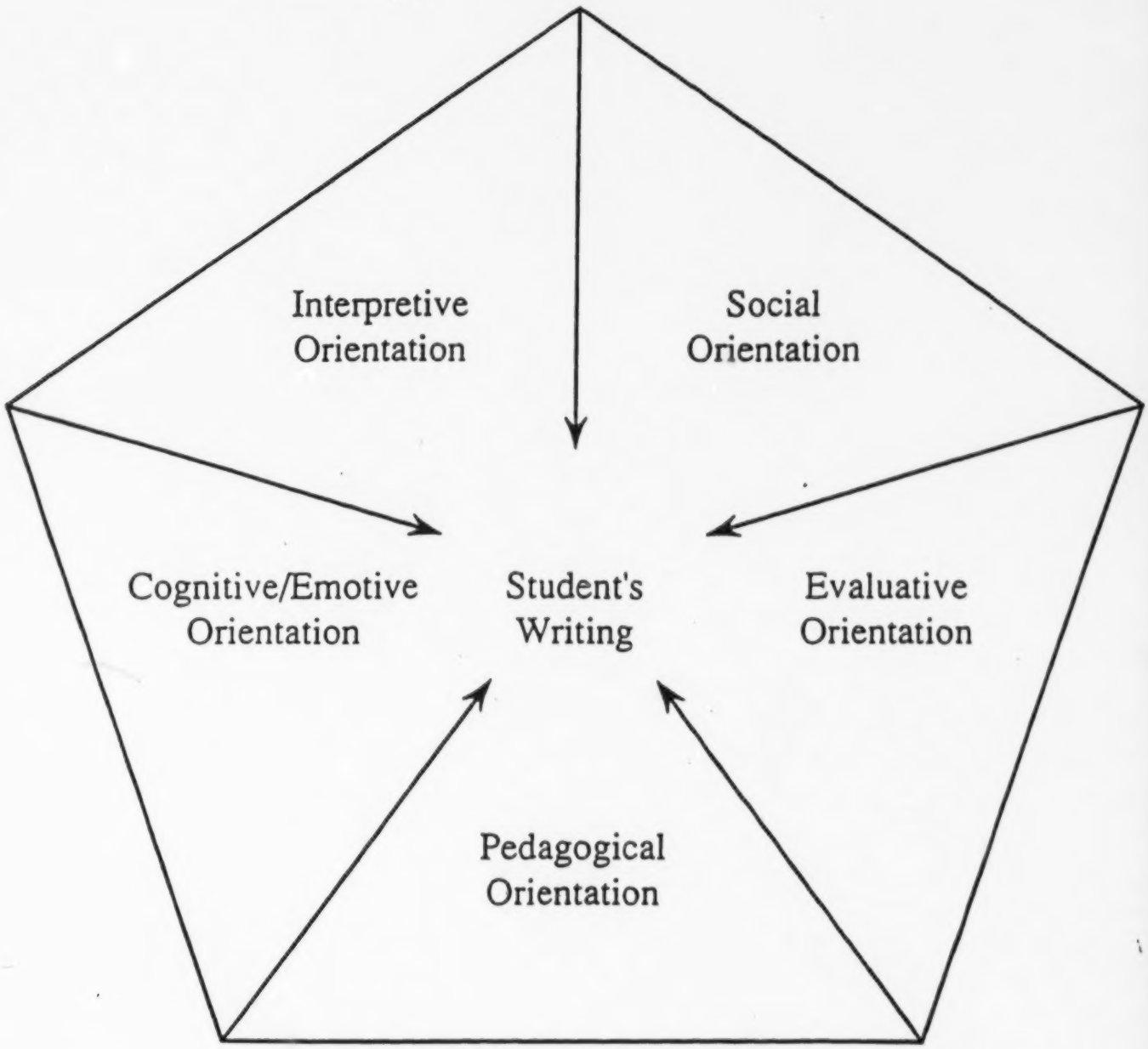

Figure 1. Orientations characterizing the teacher's perspective as reader (from Sperling, 1994).

As Figure 1 indicates, the five orientations are not mutually exclusive. More to the point, they are mutually informing. That is, they all work together to form the teacher-as-reader's perspective and, indeed, function simultaneously. To give a better sense of these orientations, I discuss them by presenting each separately from the other. Yet they are, I stress, not compartmentalized processes: lurking behind each are all the others.

Interpretive Orientation

As a reader of her students' work, Ms. Vance was constantly interpreting students' texts by relating elements in them to her own prior knowledge and experiences or to her sense of the students' prior knowledge and experiences: experiences with language and text, with personal feelings, or with life and literature. This process was, indeed, not unlike the ways individuals generally engage in making meaning, that is, pitting the unfamiliar against the familiar, the novel against the known, in order to come to new understandings.

Ms. Vance implicated this interpretive process when she discussed students' writing in class or when she wrote comments on their papers. For example, during one class discussion, a student, Nadine, read a sketch she had written personifying the sea. Ms. Vance responded to Nadine's sketch by relating a story of her own son at sea on a boat, "with waves and silver and brown sharks—he saw how beautiful that can be." Ms. Vance made Nadine's sketch more meaningful, for herself and for the other students in the class, by relating the writing to her personal life. Another day, Ms. Vance said to her class, "Tell us more about the incidents [you are writing about] if we don't see a clear picture." That is, she knew readers needed a larger dose of the writer's life experiences in order to relate to—and hence interpret—their writing. This interpretive orientation—calling on her own or the students' prior experiences to make text meaningful—was a major factor in conveying her readings of students' work.

Social Orientation

Ms. Vance invoked different social roles in relationship to her students as she read their papers, roles as disparate as "peer" and "literary scholar," "teacher" and "aesthetic reader." This social process was reminiscent of the social processes that individuals employ all the time in their daily

encounters, that is, relating to one another through role-relationships (doctor-patient, mother-son, expert-novice) that reflect why, specifically, they are together and what, in the social setting, they want or need to achieve with one another.

Like the interpretive process discussed above, this process, too, was recognizable whenever Ms. Vance discussed or commented on students' writing. Once, for example, during a class discussion concerning her reading of students' personal journals, Ms. Vance told students not to "shine [her] on" in their journal writing, that is, not to write about things that weren't true and think they were fooling their reader. Using the students' language, imploring the students to treat her and their other readers as equals, she was telling students that, when she read their journals, her role was to be trusted friend, not remote adult or dupe. In contrast, and not surprisingly, a more didactic and teacherly role often figured into Ms. Vance's reading of students' work, and, also no surprise, students recognized this role readily. For instance, when one student, Janine, speculated on the reason she received a high grade on a paper, she said, "I guess I did everything that she [Ms. Vance] asked me," implicating how firmly planted for her were the paired roles of commanding teacher and compliant student in the context of her writing achievement. Yet on Ms. Vance's part, this social orientation—establishing her role relationship to her students—in fact fluctuated to reflect different social moments.

Cognitive/Emotive Orientation

As a reader of her students' writing, Ms. Vance reflected her analytical reasoning as well as her feelings. As with other everyday encounters, encounters with students' writing could tap active intellectual processes or unanalyzed emotion such as delight or frustration.

For example, in a class discussion in which Ms. Vance asked students, "How do you feel when you read this passage," she accepted responses reflecting students' explicit analysis of the passage, such as "it's all one sentence" or "there's lots of description," as well as responses suggesting unexplored emotion, for example, "I like it." In another class discussion, Ms. Vance stated, "I'm not into sex and drugs in your writing; that way I don't get into moral dilemmas." Here she indicated that the dilemma of reading a piece of writing that challenged her morally could be resolved by "just saying

no" to certain elements in students' texts, an apparently emotional response but one grounded in self-scrutiny. This cognitive/emotive orientation was, then, another major element in her reading of students' work.

Evaluative Orientation

As a reader, Ms. Vance was constantly assessing whether the students' writing had worked for her. It may well be the case that readers both inside or outside the classroom setting, at some level of consciousness, assess as they read ("that was a great story," "what an absurd article"). However, critical assessment is at the center of reading students' writing in schools, and in Ms. Vance's classroom such assessment was both implicit and explicit.

Ms. Vance revealed her evaluative orientation when, for example, she announced that students who wanted extensive criticism on their papers could ask for it, which is to say, students could ask Ms. Vance to make explicit the implicit evaluative eye she took to their writing. The headings on several of Ms. Vance's handouts also announced her evaluative readings, for example, "Grading Rubric" or "General Rubric for Writing Assessment."

Pedagogical Orientation

Finally, Ms. Vance always viewed students' writing as vehicles for her own teaching and their learning. Unlike reading of texts outside the context of school, reading students' writing in school invites speculation about (a) what the student has learned, either about the subject matter or about writing itself, or (b) what the student still needs to learn about these things. In Ms. Vance's classroom these processes were always evident.

Ms. Vance conveyed her pedagogical orientation when, for example, she gave students a new writing assignment and stated, "I'm aiming here to make you conscious about words and to make you convey feelings." She would read the students' papers with an eye toward their fulfilling this pedagogical aim. As another illustration, during one-to-one conferences with students about their writing, a time when Ms. Vance often read students' writing aloud, her oral readings were often so closely integrated with pedagogical moments as to merge reading and teaching into one. Once, in a writing conference with Joel concerning his autobiographical essay, Ms. Vance interspersed her oral reading of his work with a number of assertions about her reading experience, for example, "Your sentences go from short, hard

hitting, and then at the end they get longer to slow the action down." Joel's paper served the pedagogical moment, that is, it was the vehicle for a writing lesson about "voice." (In fact, Joel took this particular lesson to heart and from that time on wrote "short, hard-hitting" sentences in all his papers, not always to good effect!)

Orientations Working Together

Ms. Vance's written comments on students' papers illustrate how the five orientations worked together, merging to form her perspective on the students' writing. For example, on one student's mock diary piece, written in the guise of a character from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the student wrote:

> But now, Lord, I do not know what to do, for this is the first time that my unique knowledge of religion and witchcraft has been called upon. What if I make the wrong decision?

Ms. Vance commented: "He thought it would be so easy—in black and white, like his books." As reflected in her comment, Ms. Vance as reader of this student piece (a) shaped meaning by relating the writing to her own experience of *The Crucible*; (b) related to the student as one literary scholar to another; (c) adopted an analytical stance as she interpreted the character's motives; (d) implied a positive critique of the writing, that is, the writing seemed to have worked for her; and (e) used the writing as a vehicle to expand, through her own insights, the student's understanding of the literature. In effect, all five orientations merged as she displayed her perspective on the passage she commented on.

Another student wrote the following in his autobiographical essay:

> The final step, the step of no return, the step that would launch me into the world of the unknown ...

Ms. Vance wrote, "I like the repetition in this line!" As a reader of this passage, Ms. Vance (a) shaped meaning by relating the writing to her own knowledge of written language; (b) related to the student in the role of aesthetic reader "experiencing" his words; (c) adopted a somewhat non-analytical stance as she indicated, simply, that she "liked" the repetition; (d)

implied a positive critique of the writing, that is, the writing worked for her; and (e) used the writing as a vehicle to support the writer's language strategies and reinforce a classroom lesson.

The Students and the Texts

Considering these mutually informing orientations, we examined all Ms. Vance's comments on the papers written by the eight students whom we interviewed (666 comments in all). We found that her perspective as a reader was differently conveyed, that is, the orientations each played out differently, according to both the individual student and the different types of texts they were writing.

Students. Student differences can best be illustrated through the two student extremes, the highest and lowest skilled writers. Ms. Vance's responses to the most skilled student writer seemed generally sympathetic to the student's own life experiences. In this regard, Ms. Vance showed herself as a positive reader, often peer-like, often emotionally in tune with a student writer who had learned her lessons:

"Yes! In this sense Proctor is thrown into the crucible."

"Ah—this is nice!"

"You tackle some weighty issues here, Manda."

"A good opening! Right to the point!"

Ms. Vance's responses to the least skilled writer, in contrast, seemed generally rooted in the mechanics of his text. In this regard, Ms. Vance showed herself as a more negative reader, predominantly teacher-like, and analytical toward a writer who had much yet to learn:

"Say more here. How do you feel now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Keep to one tense."

These differences in Ms. Vance's responses should not be surprising because the students themselves were so different from one another. Indeed, these student differences in large measure justified her different responses, which were shaped by students' individual needs and strengths. This

interplay of student with response, however, raises a critical issue. While, on the one hand, Ms. Vance's perspective on the students' work, and the teacher-as-reader that she displayed through her comments, was sensitive to who each student was, on the other hand, for better or worse, her readings arguably helped construct their very differences. This ordinary social process, reflecting the finely tuned duet that teacher and student can become in the classroom setting, may be worrisome if students become targets of unfair readerly bias. Yet making the process explicit and analyzing it can be helpful to teacher and student alike.

Texts. As with the students, Ms. Vance's reading of different texts is well illustrated through very different kinds of texts, personal journals and expository essays. Ms. Vance's responses on students' journals seemed to mesh students' and her own life experiences and inner feelings. In this regard, Ms. Vance showed herself as a positive reader, often peer-like, with no expectations for the students' writing to be grounded in classroom lessons:

> "I often dream I'm a world class athlete."
>
> "Yes!"
>
> "Have you ever had an experience like this where you didn't understand the language? When I was in the Netherlands I found it exhausting to have to work so hard to be understood."

In contrast, responding to expository literary criticisms, Ms. Vance conveyed a perspective that was scholarly, analytical, and very teacher-like:

> "Discuss the issues in the same order you present them in your thesis."
>
> "Key point."
>
> "I think you are hinting at D's dilemma here—but what exactly is his fear?"

Again these differences should not be surprising if we believe that different social processes—and goals—are involved in reading different writing types. Conceiving of the teacher-as-reader as operating within a complex orientational framework, however, we have ways to discuss these processes and to ponder, as well, how teacher response helps to construct students' conceptions of different types of writing.

Conclusion

While I studied only one teacher in one classroom, I believe that other teachers in other settings can put the observations derived from this case to the test of their own classroom experiences. For example, teachers can discuss with students and with one another the five orientations—the interpretive, social, cognitive/emotive, evaluative, and pedagogical—that may comprise their perspective on students' work. By doing so, they can raise a number of questions. For example, what roles are being played out as different students write for different purposes? In the processes of shaping meaning, invoking their intellect and emotions, and evaluating and implicating lessons in students' work, how do teachers help student writers achieve these roles?

As teachers, we know that when we make our own insights about ourselves as writers and readers explicit, we often help students understand themselves better as writers and readers as well. The framework, therefore, can help teachers generate hypotheses about why and how, as readers of students' writing, they construct different social experiences (a) as they address different students and (b) as they engage with different writing types. Sharing these hypotheses with students and encouraging student to make hypotheses of their own can lead also to discussions comparing teacher- and student-reader points of view.

I want to end with the caution that any framework has the drawback of masking while at the same time revealing. As Edmund Burke said, any way of seeing is also a way of not seeing; and, in James Britton's words, we classify at our peril. Yet, if used in the context of self-scrutiny within a writing pedagogy that values teacher response, the framework can be a heuristic, a starting point for reaching deeper understanding of writing in the context of school.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Sperling, M. (1994). Constructing the perspective of teacher-as-reader: A framework for studying response to student writing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 28 (2), 175-203.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The project was funded by a grant from the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English. In carrying out the project, I was assisted by an insightful and invaluable research team: Anne Beaufort, Elizabeth Burris, and Barbara Henderson. Our profound thanks go to Ms. Vance and her eleventh grade students.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

5513 Tolman Hall • University of California • Berkeley CA 94720-1670
Telephone: (510) 643-7022 • E-mail: writ@violet.berkeley.edu

The National Center for the Study of Writing, one of the national educational research centers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, is located at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Center provides leadership to elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities as they work to improve the teaching and learning of writing. The Center supports an extensive program of educational research and development in which some of the country's top language and literacy experts work to discover how the teaching and learning of writing can be improved, from the early years of schooling through adulthood. The Center's four major objectives are: (1) to create useful theories for the teaching and learning of writing; (2) to understand more fully the connections between writing and learning; (3) to provide a national focal point for writing research; and (4) to disseminate its results to American educators, policy-makers, and the public. Through its ongoing relationship with the National Writing Project, a network of expert teachers coordinated through Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, the Center involves classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort is the belief that research both must move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supports "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

Sarah Warshauer Freedman, *University of California at Berkeley, Director*
Linda Flower, *Carnegie Mellon University, Co-Director*
Richard Sterling, *University of California at Berkeley, Co-Director*
J. R. Hayes, *Carnegie Mellon University, Co-Director*
Glynda Hull, *University of California at Berkeley, Co-Director*
Donald McQuade, *University of California at Berkeley, Professional and Community Liaison*
Sandra R. Schecter, *University of California at Berkeley, Associate Director*

NATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD
Fred Hechinger, *Senior Advisor, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Co-Chair*
Courtney Cazden, *Professor, Harvard University, Co-Chair*

Marcia Farr, *Professor, University of Illinois, Chicago*
Phyllis Franklin, *Executive Director, Modern Language Association*
Erminda Garcia, *Teacher, Hall District Elementary School, Watsonville, California*
Sibyl Jacobson, *Executive Director, Metropolitan Life Foundation*
Alice Kawazoe, *Director of Staff and Curriculum Development, Oakland Unified School District*
Luis C. Moll, *Associate Professor, University of Arizona*
Miles Myers, *Executive Director, National Council of Teachers of English*
Yolanda Peeks, *Principal, Brookfield Elementary School, Oakland, California*
Stan Pesick, *Teacher, Skyline High School, Oakland, California*
Jerrie Cobb Scott, *Director, Center for Studies of Urban Literacy, Central State University, Wilberforce, Ohio*
Lee Shulman, *Professor, Stanford University*
Carol Tateishi, *Director, Bay Area Writing Project*